CLAIMS

What is claimed is:

1   1. A computer-implemented method for handling communications from one or more users for one

2   or more subscribers, the method comprising the steps of:

3   (a) receiving a communication from a user;

4   (b) querying the user for information regarding the communication;

5   (c) receiving the information from the user in response to the querying;

6   (d) determining whether the communication is pertinent or non-pertinent based on the information

7   received from the user;

8   (e) attempting to connect the user to a representative of a subscriber in real time, if the

9   communication is determined to be pertinent; and

10   (f) processing the communication for non-real-time handling by a representative of a subscriber, if

11   the communication is determined to be non-pertinent.

1   2. The invention of claim 1, wherein identity of the user is unknown to the representative and the

2   subscriber throughout steps (a)-(f).

1   3. The invention of claim 1, wherein the communication may be received from the user via any of a

2   telephone call, a web access, a fax, and an e-mail message, wherein, if the communication is received via

3   a fax or an e-mail message, then the communication is processed for non-real-time handling by the

4   representative.

1   4. The invention of claim 3, wherein step (f) comprises the step of automatically storing a return

2   address if the communication is received via a fax or an e-mail message for use in automatically

3   transmitting a reply from the representative to the user, wherein the return address is revealed to neither

4   the representative nor the subscriber.

1   5. The invention of claim 1, wherein steps (b)-(d) are implemented using natural-language

2   processing.

1   6. The invention of claim 5, wherein step (d) comprises the steps of:

2   (1) parsing the information from the user into one or more parsed terms;

3   (2) comparing the one or more parsed terms to a first list of one or more pertinent terms and

4   determining that the communication is pertinent if at least one parsed term is in the first list;

(3) otherwise, comparing the one or more parsed terms to a second list of one or more non-pertinent terms and determining that the communication is non-pertinent if at least one parsed term is in the second list; and

(4) otherwise, determining that the communication is pertinent.

7. The invention of claim 1, wherein step (e) comprises the steps of:

(1) generating, based on the information from the user, a roster of one or more qualified representatives of at least one subscriber, wherein the qualified representatives are arranged from most qualified to least qualified based on (i) the information from the user and (ii) one or more characteristics of the qualified representatives; and

(2) attempting to connect the user in real time to a qualified representative on the roster starting from the most qualified and sequentially progressing towards the least qualified until either a qualified representative is available to handle the communication from the user in real time or none of the qualified representatives on the roster are available to handle the communication from the user in real time.

8. The invention of claim 7, wherein the roster of qualified representatives is generated from a pool of representatives based on a subject matter of the user's communication and expertise of the representatives.

9. The invention of claim 7, wherein the roster of qualified representatives is generated from a pool of representatives based on language proficiency information for the user and each representative.

10. The invention of claim 7, wherein the roster of qualified representatives is generated from a pool of representatives based on timing of the communication from the user and a schedule for each representative.

11. The invention of claim 7, wherein the roster is generated based on whether a representative has handled a previous communication from the same user.

12. The invention of claim 7, wherein step (e)(2) comprises the step of transmitting two or more different types of messages in real time to a currently selected representative in an attempt to alert the representative that a user is waiting.

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13. The invention of claim 7, wherein each attempt to connect the user to a qualified representative is terminated, if that representative does not respond to the attempt within a specified duration.

14. The invention of claim 7, wherein step (e)(1) comprises the step of generating a roster of two or more qualified representatives corresponding to two or more different subscribers.

15. The invention of claim 1, wherein step (e) comprises the steps of:

(1) determining whether the user and the representative will communicate using different formats; and

(2) if so, then applying at least one of computer-based speech-to-text processing and computer-based text-to-speech processing to convert one or more messages transmitted between the user and the representative.

16. The invention of claim 1, comprising the step of enabling the user to leave a message for non-real-time handling by the representative, if step (e) fails to connect the user to any representative or if the communication is non-pertinent.

17. The invention of claim 16, comprising the steps of:

enabling the representative to leave, in a message box assigned to the user, a reply to the message; and

enabling the user to retrieve the reply from the user's message box.

18. The invention of claim 1, comprising the step of enabling the user to schedule a conference with a representative, if step (e) fails to connect the user to any representative or if the communication is non-pertinent.

19. The invention of claim 18, comprising the step of allowing the user to choose from a list of one or more available times for the conference based on availability of one or more representatives.

20. The invention of claim 1, wherein the communication from the user is by voice and further comprising the step of masking the user's voice.

21. The invention of claim 20, wherein the user's voice is masked by distorting audio signals corresponding to the voice.

22. The invention of claim 20, wherein the user's voice is masked by applying speech-to-text processing to convert the user's voice into text.

23. The invention of claim 22, further comprising the step of applying text-to-speech processing to convert the text into a computer-generated voice that is transmitted to the representative.

24. The invention of claim 1, further comprising the steps of:

assigning the user a password for a subsequent communication regarding the communication; and

allowing the subsequent communication, if the user provides either (i) the password or (ii) other identifying information related to the communication.

25. A machine-readable medium, having encoded thereon program code, wherein, when the program code is executed by a machine, the machine implements a method for handling communications from one or more users for one or more subscribers, the method comprising the steps of:

(a) receiving a communication from a user;

(b) querying the user for information regarding the communication;

(c) receiving the information from the user in response to the querying;

(d) determining whether the communication is pertinent or non-pertinent based on the information received from the user;

(e) attempting to connect the user to a representative of a subscriber in real time, if the communication is determined to be pertinent; and

(f) processing the communication for non-real-time handling by a representative of a subscriber, if the communication is determined to be non-pertinent.

26. A computer-based system for handling communications from one or more users for one or more subscribers, the system comprising a server configured to access one or more databases, wherein:

(a) the server is configured to receive a communication from a user;

(b) the server is configured to query the user for information regarding the communication;

(c) the server is configured to receive the information from the user in response to the querying;

(d) the server is configured to determine whether the communication is pertinent or non-pertinent based on the information received from the user and information stored in at least one of the databases;

(e) the server is configured to attempt to connect the user to a representative of a subscriber in real time, if the communication is determined to be pertinent; and

10   (f) the server is configured to process the communication for non-real-time handling by a

11   representative of a subscriber, if the communication is determined to be non-pertinent.

1   27. A process for a subscriber to handle communications from one or more users, the process

2   comprising the steps of:

3   (1) engaging one or more representatives to handle the communications from the users; and

4   (2) subscribing to a service provided by a computer-based system configured to:

5   (a) receive a communication from a user;

6   (b) query the user for information regarding the communication;

7   (c) receive the information from the user in response to the querying;

8   (d) determine whether the communication is pertinent or non-pertinent based on the information

9   received from the user;

10   (e) attempt to connect the user to a representative of the subscriber in real time, if the

11   communication is determined to be pertinent; and

12   (f) process the communication for non-real-time handling by a representative of the subscriber,

13   if the communication is determined to be non-pertinent.

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